Accolades or Achievement?
Addressing the unforeseen consequences of therapeutic pedagogy

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> "We have found little to indicate that indiscriminately promoting self-esteem in today's children or adults, just for being themselves, offers society any compensatory benefits beyond the seductive pleasure it brings to those engaged in the exercise."
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> Baumeister *et al* (2005).

In June this year, Wellesley High School became a focus of attention worldwide, following a graduation speech made by a teacher at the school. Departing from the traditional rhetoric of such ceremonies, English teacher David McCullough told the assembled graduates that they were neither special nor exceptional, but may well believe they were because they had been "pampered, cosseted, doted upon, helmeted, and bubble-wrapped, feted and fawned over", an effect, he argued, of Americans' "love of accolades more than genuine achievement" (Christakis, 2012, page 1). This assertion struck a chord not only in his home country but more widely in the Western world, with many educators, childcare workers and parents experiencing a sense of unease about the extent to which this claim was justifiable, and if so, what sort of corrective might be needed.

Wellesley's shot across the bows of praise dependency followed hot on the heels of an article published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* entitled "'It's ok — Not everyone can be good at math': Instructors with an entity theory comfort (and demotivate) students" (Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012). The article provides research evidence from a sample of first year university students that appears to justify concerns about the downside of praise-dependency in young people. Moreover, it suggests that well meaning teachers may be aiding and abetting student vulnerability rather than student capability:

> [The research] suggests that an educational system focused on accepting weaknesses (as long as one focuses on strengths) is not quite as positive as intended. It may lead to situations in which the forces pushing students to dis-engage from important fields of study are stronger than those encouraging them to

> persevere through difficulty. Thus, the popular practice today of identifying weaknesses and turning students toward their strengths may be another self-esteem-building strategy gone awry… and one that may contribute to the low numbers of students pursuing math and science. (Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2102, p. 6.)

The extent to which self-esteem strategies may have "gone awry" more generally in Western middle class homes and schools, not just in America, is underlined in a recent article in a leading Australian newspaper. Written by Joel Meares, a Generation Y Sydney-sider, the article contains a rueful reflection on the Generation Y experience of being on the receiving end of overwhelming attention and praise in his early life:

> We were raised on a diet of constant reinforcement and told we could do anything. Keen to boost our self-esteem, Mum and Dad sacrificed their weekends to chauffer us from soccer to ballet to drama to Nippers….Our teachers showered us with unjustifiable praise.... In kindergarten I won an award for tying my shoelaces a week later than everyone else; in year 7, I won a ribbon for not finishing a cross-country run. (Meares, 2011, p.13).

In light of the above, I think it's timely to ask about the extent to which our good intentions to build the self-esteem of children have been a two-edged sword, militating against their long-term learning interests at the same time helping them to feel better about themselves in the present. Put another way, have we *overdone* praise and *underdone* challenge in middle class schools and homes, and if so what might we do about it?

To explore this issue more fully, it is useful to reflect briefly on the post-war cultural patterns we have seen in the West in relation to child development, in particular the extent to which self-esteem has come to occupy centre-stage as a knowledge object in the education and care of young people.

In the 1950s, my mother was both a good Australian parent and a good Australian teacher. She was sparing with praise – it was hard-earned and genuine when given – and she believed in punishment when and where it was warranted. As a good parent and teacher in her times, my mother occasionally hit her own children or other people's

children. She did not hit too hard nor did she hit arbitrarily or carelessly. She hit them for breaking explicit rules, the rules of the home or the rules of the classroom. It was a time when effective parenting, like teaching, involved overt forms of coercion (including corporal punishment) sanctioned for preparing post-War baby boomers to take their place in a vertically ordered world of salaried work and social life.

By the 1980s, most teachers and parents had come to think differently about what counted as good teaching and good parenting. The previous two decades had witnessed a rising tide of protest against the exercise of arbitrary, punitive power, whether through the state, the school, the home, or the workplace. Schools were challenged by the legacy of Carl Rogers and other advocates of person-centred education to invert the traditional prioritising of teaching over learning.

The shift in emphasis from teaching and the teacher to learning and the learner that began in the mid to late fifties paralleled the dissemination of Rogerian client-centred therapy as a powerful new tactic for "filling the world with self-esteem" (Ward, 1996). Sociologist Steven Ward argues that this was the period in which self-esteem "became a central concept in experimental and survey studies in psychology and social psychology" (p.9), studies that would soon be applied to students (particularly marginal or failing students) to understand more about their motivation or lack of it in relation to schooling.

Studies explicitly linking low self-esteem with adolescent angst, dysfunctionality and low academic performance, were to re-direct teacher's desire – and progressive pedagogical theory – away from the seductive and coercive pedagogical techniques of the Sage on the Stage and towards the therapeutic techniques of the teacher-counsellor as Guide on the Side. Therapeutic techniques came to replace the swish of the cane and the threat of the wooden spoon in the daily life of school and home, with the result that most Western children have lived less fearful and painful lives in the last thirty years or so. In other words, by the last decades of the twentieth century, it had become impossible to think 'proper' teaching or parenting as involving physical intimidation of any kind. The idea that learning is best done in a non-threatening atmosphere had become hegemonic, and, we might want to add, not before time!

Growing interest in the student/client as the subject of professional educational services had the effect, among other things, of broadening of educational purposes, at least in theory, from a narrow instrumental focus on educating for the needs of the industrial state to a much more comprehensive set of aims to do with individual social being and belonging, and in turn with living, learning and earning well. Not only did this mean investment in different kinds of education theorising –curriculum theory, equity, differentiation, disability and special learning needs, learning science and so on – to cater for different populations of learners, but it also meant greater attention being given to ages, stages, cultures and styles in educational development, and, concomitantly, a burgeoning of teaching expertise in specialist levels of education - early years, middle years, post-compulsory, higher and also adult-education. A teacher was no longer 'just a teacher' but a professional whose specialist expertise was aligned with particular institutional or ages/stages/special needs categories.

In the decades since pedagogy and positive psychology became snug bedfellows, progressive teachers of all stripes had come to accept that raising student self-esteem was part of the work of engaging and motivating their students. In other words, the idea of raising self-esteem had come, by the end of the last century, to go without saying as an educational end in itself (see McWilliam, 1999). First among the client groups to be the subjects of this new therapeutic ethic, for better *and* worse, were very young children, followed closely by socially marginal groups (non-anglo, low socio-economic status) with a record of being poorly served by traditional educational institutions.

Therapeutic techniques were now available for remediating school failure as a ubiquitous social problem, while at the same time serving to distance disaffected youth from the sort of high-end academic tasks that were deemed to put at risk the important confidence-building work being done by committed teachers. Simply put, lowering the bar on challenge was preferable to the threat of lowering any 'at risk' child's self-esteem. As the categories for ascribing vulnerability burgeoned, so the reach of therapeutic techniques would be extended from the young and the marginal to an entire student population. The naming of the gifted as a vulnerable social category was important inasmuch as it worked as a tactic for ensuring that high self-esteem was to be prioritised in education even over high intellectual achievement. The Brilliant, the Idiosyncratic and the Eccentric were

increasingly re-framed as having 'special needs' related to their lack of unbridled optimism, social ease and self-confidence. By the end of the century, the gifted and the isolate, the anxious and the depressed, indeed the entire student body with its yet-to-be identified vulnerabilities and needs, had become suitable cases for therapeutic treatment. Whatever else good teachers did, it was increasingly important to ensure that their students should feel good about themselves and positive about their futures.

This therapeutic imperative continues in this present century to frame the effective teacher, particularly in Western schools, as one who comes to know the students in the fullness of their vulnerability and their aspirations. Of course, there are profound pleasures in understanding ourselves to be actively raising the self-esteem of others, and I for one would not want to be so churlish as to deny teachers their fair share of pleasure. As Stephen Fry (1997) has pointed out, today's teachers have so few to begin with. Yet it is important to examine the possibility that Baumeister and his colleagues are right when they claim, as they do in the assertion that introduces this paper, that raising self-esteem may be a less worthy goal than this generation of teachers believe it to be, and thus, that twenty-first century teachers' pedagogical efforts may be better directed elsewhere.

I became aware of the seductive pleasures of teaching as a therapeutic endeavour while working with students teachers, most of whom were committed to the idea that the work of teaching was, fundamentally, the work of raising children's self-esteem, because this, in turn, would be the platform from which they would spring to 'reach their full potential' as 'lifelong learners'. The key premises driving the logic here are that (a) high self-esteem is undeniably a good thing and that (b) the students' identities are more likely than not to be marked by low self-esteem, or at least self-esteem that could and should be higher. Both of these propositions are as questionable, I would argue, as they are seductive to the 'teacher-as-therapist".

On a recent visit to a Year 3 classroom, I observed a young boy sprawled out on the carpeted floor, writing. The quality of the handwriting was poor as might be expected, given the less than optimal conditions under which he was writing. On inquiring as to why he was not sitting on a chair at a table to enact his writing task, I was told by his teacher, a pleasant and well qualified young woman, that 'he likes it down there'. Her job,

she went on to explain, was basically to 'keep him happy'. In this second decade of the twenty-first century it is useful to understand the effects of teachers' conflation of pedagogical skill with the ability to 'keep kids happy', in order to consider how this therapeutic model of teaching is becoming more problematic as a pedagogical norm for this century. It is important if for no other reason than the need to move pedagogical work beyond a therapeutic era of 'low threat, low challenge' education, exemplified in the story of the floor-loving boy above, to an era that can significantly raise the bar on risk and challenge – ie, an era of 'low threat, high challenge' educational practice.

I would like to introduce at this point a few disturbing trends that are not the fault of children but rather an effect of the messages we give them about the meaning of living, learning and earning. *Trend Number 1*: The sale of oranges is in decline, apparently because few middle class Westerners can be bothered to peel them anymore. Our children complain that orange-peeling is too difficult and makes their fingers all sticky. *Trend Number 2:* School guidance officers are noting that they now spend less time seeing the bottom quartile of 'special needs' students and more time counselling 'A-grade' students who have just been awarded their first 'B'. Parents are particularly upset when, as is increasingly the case, they have done more work on the 'B-grade' assignment than their child did. *Trend Number 3*: As intimated above, secondary school students are opting out of advanced Sciences and Math in favour of 'easier' options like life-skills electives (see also McWilliam, Poronnik & Taylor, 2008). *Trend Number 4*: For many of our young people, task completion is all about finding instant solutions and being rewarded with easy success for which they might anticipate another 'A-grade'.

The widespread trend among teachers and students alike for seeking out easy (and therefore self-affirming) options has not gone without critical comment. Michael Foley's recent book *The Age of Absurdity (2010)* draws attention to the retreat from challenge exemplified in the above-mentioned cultural practices, as a disturbing tendency of our times. In his chapter, "The Rejection of Difficulty and Understanding", he sums up the widespread preference for 'low challenge' living thus:

> Difficulty has become repugnant because it denies entitlement, disenchants potential, limits mobility and flexibility, delays gratification, distracts from distraction and demands responsibility, commitment, attention and thought. (p.113)

Foley understands the retreat from difficulty in living, learning and earning as an effect, at least in part, of our willingness to elevate 'self-esteem' as a social good worthy *for its own sake*, regardless of personal or professional achievement. He understands self-esteem as "ha[ving] no values or principles", and as requiring no effort beyond insisting on affirmation from others. In short, in line with the earlier findings of Baumeister *et al* (2005), Foley understands investment in raising children's self-esteem as a means by which young people avoid intellectual challenge. I would want to add that is also a means by which teachers and parents can deprive young people of the *pleasure* that attends rigorous engagement with complex learning. In saying this, I am not advocating that we return to the authoritarian pedagogy that was the hallmark of the Sage on the Stage at his worst; rather, I am seeking to foreground the capacity to engage in complex thinking as an important resource for addressing social and economic vulnerability.

I have written at length elsewhere about how twenty-first century youth differ from former generations (see McWilliam, 2008) in terms of the *speed* with which activity options can and do get picked up and dropped, and the *massive impact of digital technologies* in giving young people 'alternatives' that previous generations never had. 'Gamer' researchers John Beck and Mitchell Wade see this present generation as "grow[ing] up playing games of chance. …. They are twice as likely as boomers to believe that success in life is due to luck. This prepares them to shrug off pretty serious setbacks" (Beck and Wade, 2006: p.xiv). Put bluntly, they expect to make it up – and throw it away – as they go. Everything is correctible, everything can be jettisoned instantly (except, apparently, a career-limiting photo pasted on Facebook!)

While it is tempting to applaud unreservedly the affordances that allow for unprecedented speed in our social and commercial transactions, we are also called to pay attention to a growing body of neurological and sociological research that focuses on some of the not-so-welcome effects of the Internet-based technologies. The Net, according to Nicholas Carr, in his book, *The Shallows* (2010), works as an ecology of

disruptive, distracting (as well as highly seductive) technologies for changing what counts as intellectual work and, indeed, what is coming to count as intellectual capacity. Carr sees the sort of deep and sustained thinking that we have associated with intellectual achievement as being problematically undermined by the Net's invitation to "the permanent state of distraction that defines the on-line life" (p.112). His concern is that the "buzzing mind" is an effect of the Net's capacity to "seize our attention only to scatter it" (p.118). While Carr acknowledges the unique contribution of digital tools to an expanding social universe, he worries about the emergent character of a Net-based social and intellectual world:

> The Net's interactivity gives us powerful new tools for finding information, expressing ourselves, and conversing with others. It also turns us into lab rats constantly pressing levers to get tiny pellets of social or intellectual nourishment. (Carr, 2010, p.117)

Of course, there are those who would dismiss both Carr and Foley as grumpy old curmudgeons generating moral panic out of their own personal discomfort with the digital age. Whether or not we agree with Foley's thesis that the retreat from difficulty is a problematic effect, at least in part, of society's narcissistic obsession with the self, or Carr's thesis that thinking itself is being re-shaped by a digital environment of "cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking and superficial learning" (Carr, 1020: p.116), there is little doubt that twenty-first century living, learning and earning is replete with complexity and becoming more so.

Earning a living in a highly competitive global marketplace demands engagement with more technology-enhanced processes, more complex design problems, more speedy non-routine transactions, more scrutiny of individual, team and organizational performance, less certainty of tenure, and less career linearity, particularly in high-tech industries and those most exposed to frequent market fluctuations. So too civic participation in debates about global futures demands higher levels of scientific and systems literacy. Meanwhile, the contrary trend to easy success and academic inflation is increasingly observable as a problematic effect of therapeutic pedagogy.

According to sociologist Richard Sennett (2006), our present generation of young people can anticipate a working life in which unstable, fragmentary social conditions are the norm. This will demand of every working individual, regardless of how much self-esteem they may bring to the workplace, a capacity to improvise a life-narrative without any sustained sense of self or continuous identity. It will mean paying constant attention to managing short-term relationships while migrating from place to place, job to job and task to task, and re-developing talents as reality's demands shift. Talent, Sennett reminds us, is not merely a set of exceptional individual skills and dispositions but it is also very much a matter of culture. As work cultures become less willing or able to reward craftsmanship – ie, doing one thing extremely well – hard-earned skills have an increasingly brief shelf-life, particularly in fields closely related to technology, sciences and advanced forms of manufacturing. Letting go of the past becomes just as important as scanning the future horizon under these conditions. In other words, the shelf-life of Ozymandias's narcissistic challenge to "look on my works ye mighty and despair!" will not be measured in centuries but in seconds!

While the challenges of short-termism have everyone hopping, the new global marketplace also has a high bar when it comes to employability in meaningful, well-remunerated work. Thus it is unlikely to reward an individual's capacity to perform low-challenge tasks, routine thinking or simple transactions (see Pink, 2005). In other words, it will not reward anyone for shallow engagement with complex and demanding productivity and sustainability issues, and so it will not continue any school-established pattern of rewarding expectation of easy success with feel-good feedback. Well-paid work disappears if it can be technologised or go to those who can work at speed to solve complex problems through generating creative 'higher order' solutions. To do this, young people will need to be not simply faster but also to be more strategic and analytical in terms of their capacity to learn and unlearn from the social world around them, regardless of their levels of self-esteem. While we would want them to be confident in their capacity to 'know what to do when they don't know what to do', this capacity is more likely to derive from experiencing the discomfort of 'not yet' than being praised for average achievement.

Average achievers who believe themselves to be high achievers will struggle to navigate "at blinding speed…across the vast reaches of the Internet" (Seely Brown, 2006, p.3), or to demonstrate other capacities that make up the panoply of skills needed to engage with the increasingly vexed problems and new opportunities that mark this new century. As James Martin has pointed out in *The Meaning of the 21st Century* (2006), the problems that remain to be engaged with – global warming, water shortages, destruction of life in the oceans, pandemics, violent religious extremism, runaway computer intelligence and so on – are not just unprecedented historically but will take a great deal of high level cognitive and political, as well as ethical and co-operative activity, to redress. The opportunities that flow from these will go to scientific and symbolic analysts who can learn from the instructive complications of error-making – who can take pleasure in exclaiming, as Thomas Edison did, 'I now know ten thousand ways that it won't work!' This stands in stark contrast to the imperative to 'tell me I'm wonderful and give me an A'.

So what does all this mean for our schools and colleges? Put bluntly, a pedagogical culture that prioritises what Frank Furedi (2004) calls "the therapeutics of affirmation" (p.122) over deep engagement with rigorous and complex tasks is unlikely to be building the skills and dispositions needed for future success. Where teachers continue to invest in raising self-esteem to help young people 'reach their full potential' (that banal and increasingly tired claim of an entire generation of glossy school brochures), it is unlikely that we will be serving young people as well as we might. At the same time, it must be said that solutions are not to be found in nostalgia for vertical models of control and command, given the conditions within which young people exercise their living and learning preferences. Nor will they be found in hand-wringing about declining standards and calling for more frequent standardised testing and punishing schools whose students don't perform well on twentieth-century-style test questions.

What is likely to be more worthwhile is more explicit engagement with pedagogical approaches (with and without digital tools) that have the effect of holding rigour and pleasure together, so that the project of building self-efficacy is not continually pitted against the intellectual project of learning from the instructive complications of failure.

The 'raising self-esteem' project, like the call for 'back to basics', is facing growing opposition. We have burgeoning evidence of disconnect between perceived self-worth and provable skill, with research showing little or no correlation between how people feel about themselves and how they perform. The brute message is that self-efficacy, in the final analysis, is not being found to derive from teachers' or parents' compliments, nor from being spared failure, but from evidence of real and lasting achievement (see for example, *Down with Self-Esteem* (Greenberg, 2007); *Generation Me: Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled – and more miserable than ever before* (Twenge, 2009); *Findings puncture self-esteem claims* (Bower, 2003); *Self-Esteem: Why we need less of it* (Sullivan, 2002)). When we remove complexity, difficulty and the possibility of error-making from school or university learning, we create a false world of expectations and entitlements that can and do come back to haunt young people as they negotiate an uncertain and demanding social future. It seems to me that we now need a new generation of teachers who rely less on giving praise regardless of effort or achievement, and look to introducing young people to the genuine pleasures – as well as the discomfort and risk – of rigorous and sustained engagement with learning.

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